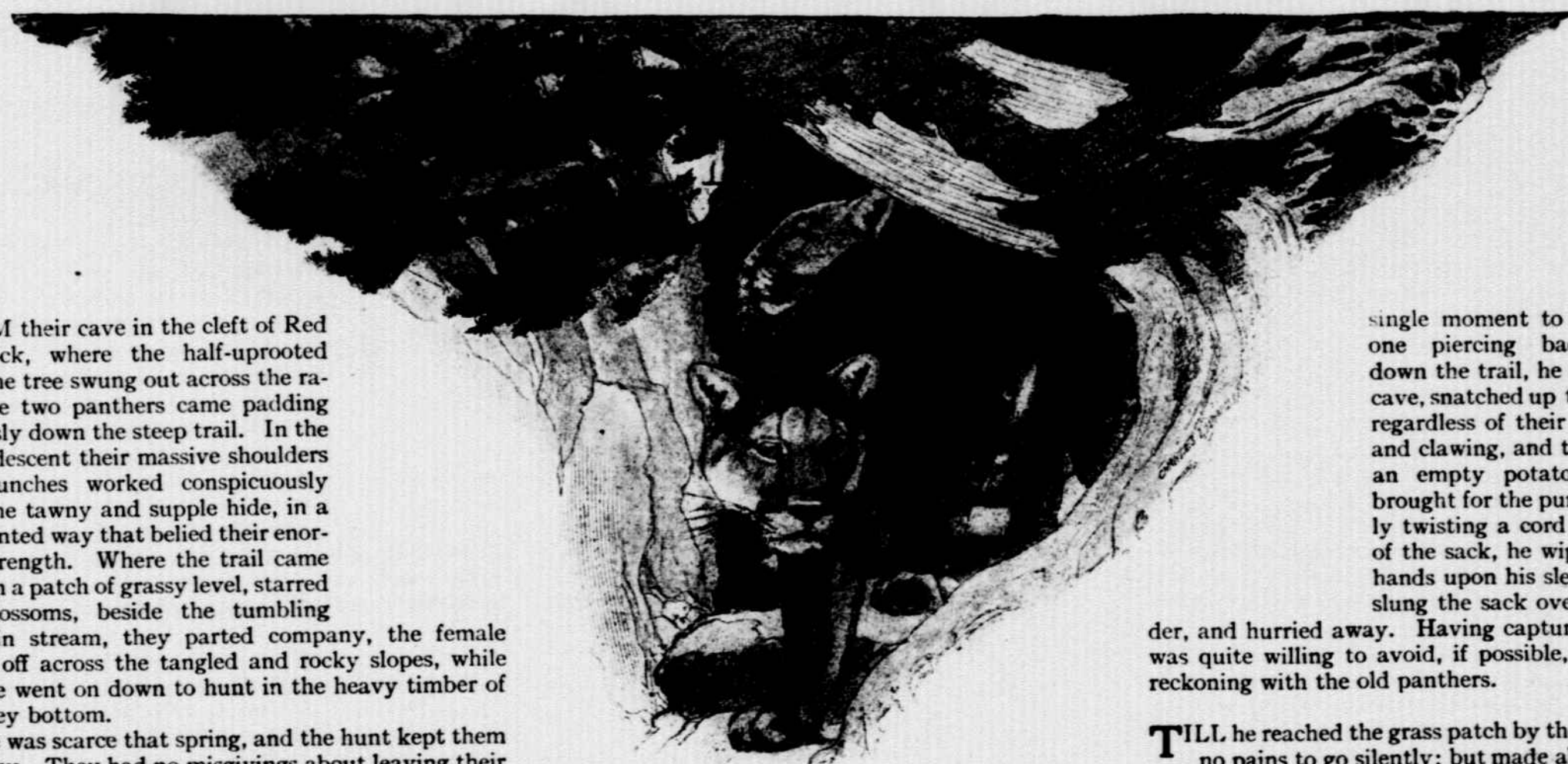


THE AVENGER



FROM their cave in the cleft of Red Rock, where the half-uprooted pine tree swung out across the ravine, the two panthers came padding noiselessly down the steep trail. In the abrupt descent their massive shoulders and haunches worked conspicuously under the tawny and supple hide, in a loose jointed way that belied their enormous strength. Where the trail came out upon a patch of grassy level, starred with blossoms, beside the tumbling mountain stream, they parted company, the female turning off across the tangled and rocky slopes, while the male went on down to hunt in the heavy timber of the valley bottom.

Game was scarce that spring, and the hunt kept them both busy. They had no misgivings about leaving their two blind, sprawling cubs to doze on their bed of dry grass in the dark inner corner of the cave. They knew very well that in all their range, for a radius of forty or fifty miles about the humped and massive hogback of Red Rock, there was no beast so bold as to trespass on the panthers' lair.

It was perhaps a half-hour later that a man came in sight, a halfbreed squatter, moving stealthily up the farther bank of the stream. His dark figure appeared and disappeared, slipping from rock to tree, from tree to wild vine thicket, as he picked his way furtively along the steep and obstructed slope. Not a twig cracked under his moccasined steps, so carefully did he go, though the soft roar of the stream would have covered any such light sound from all ears but the initiated and discriminating ones of the forest kindreds. His small, watchful eyes took note of the grassy level on the other side of the stream, and with a sure leap to a rock in mid-channel he came across.

He arrived just a few feet below the spot where the female panther had taken her departure, digging in her broad pads heavily in the take-off of her leap. The grasses, trodden down in the heavy footprints, were still slowly lifting their heads. At sight of this trail, so startlingly fresh, the man crouched instantly back into the fringing bush, half lifting his rifle and peering with vigilant eyes into the heart of every covert. He expected to see the beast's eyes palely glaring at him from some near ambush.

In a few minutes, however, he satisfied himself that the panther had gone on. Emerging from the bushes, he knelt down and examined the footprints minutely. Yes, the trail was older than he had at first imagined, by a good half-hour. Some of the trodden grass had recovered itself, and a crushed brown beetle was already surrounded by ants. He rose with a grim smile and traced the trail back across the green patch till it mingled with the confusion of footprints, going and coming, which led up the mountains. In this confusion he overlooked the traces of the other panther; so he was led to the conclusion that only one of the pair had gone out. If this was the path to the lair, as he inferred both from the number of the tracks and the fitness of the country, then he must expect to find one of the pair at home. His crafty and deep-set eyes flamed at the thought; for he was a great hunter, and a dead shot with his heavy Winchester.

FOR days the halfbreed had been searching for the trail and the den of the panther pair. His object was the cubs, which, as he knew, would still be tiny and manageable at this season. A good panther skin was well worth the effort of the chase; but a man in the settlements who was collecting wild animals for a circus had offered him one hundred and fifty dollars for a pair of healthy cubs. The halfbreed's idea was to get the cubs as young as possible and bring them up by bottle in his cabin, till they should be large enough for delivery to the collector.

Before starting up the steep and difficult trail, the man examined his rifle. A panther at home, protecting her young, was not a foe with which he could take risks. She commanded the tribute of his utmost precaution.

A careful survey of the slope before him convinced his practised eye that the den must be somewhere in that high cleft where the broken spaces of the red sandstone

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Drawings by Charles Livingston Bull

glowed brightly through dark patches and veils of clinging firs. He marked the great, half fallen pine tree, with its top swung out from the rock face and its branches curling upward. Somewhere not far from that, he concluded, would he come upon the object of his search.

Difficult as was the ascending trail, now slippery with wet moss, now obstructed with thick, low branches which offered no obstacle to the panthers but were seriously baffling to the man, he climbed swiftly and noiselessly. His lithe feet, in their flexible moosehide moccasins, took firm hold of the irregularities of the trail, and he glided over or under the opposing branches with as little rustling as a blacksnake might have made. Every few moments he stiffened himself to the rigidity of a stump and listened like a startled doe as he interrogated every rock and tree within reach of his eyes. Ready to match his trained senses against those of any of the wilderness kin, he felt confident of seeing or hearing any creature by which he might be seen or heard. Mounting thus warily, in some twenty minutes or thereabouts he came out upon a narrow shelf of rock beneath the downward swing of the old pine tree.

CAUTIOUSLY he peered about him, looking for some indication of the cave. This, as he told himself, was just the place for it. It could not be very far away. Then suddenly he shut himself down on his heels as if with a snap and thrust upward the muzzle of his Winchester. Lifting his eyes, he had seen the black entrance of the cave almost on a level with the top of his head. A little chill ran down his spine as he realized that for those few seconds his scalp had been at the mercy of the occupant. Why had the beast not struck?

The man took off his old cap, stuck it on the muzzle of his gun, and, raising it cautiously, wagged it from side to side. This move eliciting no demonstration from within the cave, he scratched noisily on the rock. Having repeated this challenge several times without response, he felt sure that both panthers must be away from home.

Nevertheless, he was not going to let himself be overconfident. He was too sagacious and instructed a woodsman to think that wild creatures would always act the same way in the same circumstances. It was not impossible that the occupant of the cave was just waiting to see. Drawing back some six or eight feet, the man wriggled slantingly up the slope of rock, with the muzzle of his Winchester just ahead of him, till his face came level with the entrance. Every muscle of his body was strung taut for instantaneous recoil in case he should see before him two palely flaming eyes, afloat, as it were, upon the darkness of the interior.

But, no, at first he could see nothing but the darkness itself. Then, as his eyes adapted themselves to the gloom, he made out the inmost recesses of the cave and realized that, except for a vague little heap in one corner, the cave was empty. In that case there was not a

single moment to be lost. With one piercing backward glance down the trail, he slipped into the cave, snatched up the two kittens, regardless of their savage spitting and clawing, and thrust them into an empty potato sack he had brought for the purpose. Hurriedly twisting a cord about the neck of the sack, he wiped his bleeding hands upon his sleeve with a grin, slung the sack over his left shoulder,

and hurried away. Having captured the prize, he was quite willing to avoid, if possible, any immediate reckoning with the old panthers.

TILL he reached the grass patch by the stream he took no pains to go silently; but made all possible haste, crashing through the branches and sending a shower of small stones clattering down the ravine. The angry and indomitable kittens in the bag on his back kept growling and spitting and trying to dig their sharp claws into him; but his buckskin shirt was tough, and he paid no attention to their protests.

At the edge of the torrent, however, he adopted new tactics. Leaping to the rock in midchannel, he crossed, and then, with great difficulty, clambered along close by the water's edge, well within the splash and the spray. When he had made a couple of hundred yards in this way, he came to a small tributary brook, up which he waded for some eighty or a hundred feet. Then, leaving the brook, he crept stealthily up the bank, through the underbrush, and so back to the valley he had just left, at a point some little distance farther down stream. Thence he ran straight on down the valley at a long, easy trot, keeping always, as far as possible, under cover, and swerving from time to time this way or that in order to avoid treading on dry underbrush.

His progress, however, was quite audible; for at this point in the venture he was sacrificing secrecy to speed. He had fifteen or sixteen miles to go, his cabin being on the farther slope of the great spur called Broken Ridge, and he knew that he could not feel absolutely sure as to the outcome of the enterprise until he should have the little captives secure within his cabin.

As he threaded his way through the heavy timber of the valley bottom, a good six or seven miles from the den in Red Rock, he began to feel more at ease. Here among the great trunks there was less undergrowth to obscure his view, less danger of the panthers being able to steal upon him and take him unawares. He slackened his pace somewhat, drawing deep breaths into his leathery lungs. But he relaxed no precaution, running noiselessly now over the soft carpet of the forest, and flitting from tree-trunk to tree-trunk as if an enemy was at his very heels. At last, quitting the valley, he started on a long diagonal up the near slope of Burnt Ridge Spur.

The face of the country now suddenly changed. Years before a forest fire had traversed this slope of the ridge, cutting a clean swath straight along it.

The man's ascending trail thus led him across a space of open, a space of undergrowth hardly knee deep, dotted with tall rampicks, or fire stripped tree-trunks, bleached by the rains, and inexpressibly desolate. Having here no cover, the man ran his best, and finally, having crossed the open, he dropped down in a dense thicket to rest, breathing hard from that last spurt.

IN the secure concealment of the thicket he laid aside the complaining burden from his back, stood his rifle in a bush, let out his belt a couple of holes, and stooped to stretch himself on the moss for a quick rest. As he did so, he cast a prudent eye along his back trail. Instantly he stiffened, snatched up his gun again, sank on one knee, and insinuated the muzzle carefully between the screening branches. A huge panther had just shown himself, rising into view for an instant and at once sinking back into the leafage.

At this disappearance the man grew uneasy. Was the beast still trailing him, belly to earth, through the low undergrowth? Or had it swerved aside to try and get ahead of him, to ambuscade him by and by from some rock or low-hung branch? Or, on the other hand, had it given up the pursuit rather than face the perils of the